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ABSTRACT

Three English courses, based on the idea that subject matter, basic skills, and values are three separate areas that can be taught simultaneously, are described in this paper. The course described in the first section, "Women and Literature," combines interesting thematic material and values clarification with practice in traditional composition techniques. The paper's second section describes a course in oral communication that teaches all the basic language skills, emphasizing everyday speaking and listening skills. The future studies course described in the paper's final section helps students develop values appropriate to the decisions they will have to make in the future, while they study some science fiction and complete skill-developing writing assignments. (JL)

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Forward With the Basics:

Preparing for the 21st Century?

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As we look forward into the future, we may well ask, "What will we be teaching in the English curriculum when the year 2001 comes? How will we teach--by book, by video, by computer?" Perhaps now is the best time for us to evaluate our present curricula and set our goals.

In this Twentieth Century, vast changes in the process of education have taken place. With the invention of the printing press around 1440, the written word became accessible to the masses and like the magic of the words "Open Sesame," all who could read could enter the Fantasyworld of written language. But an even greater leap has been made possible in the 20th Century by technology--television, radio, satellite communication, jet transportation, microcomputers, microfilm -- to name a few inventions which have catapulted mankind from a rather uncivilized state to the possibility of becoming truly civilized. Technology has provided the tools for great progress.

In the past, survival was the predominant goal, but now that we no longer need to struggle to survive, our alternatives place squarely upon our shoulders the responsibility for making choices which will guide our civilization toward a higher state. When the medical field discovered sulfa drugs and penicillin, these cures saved many lives, but they also brought with them the questions of overpopulation. Lifesaving devices such as artificial hearts, intravaneous feeding, etc. have led us to the necessity of deciding where we stand on euthanasia.

Just as science has influenced the physical aspects of our existence, technology has affected our education. In many cases in the past, education has been wafted about upon the winds of public whim -- accountability, alternative

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schools, proficiency testing, and the back to basics movement. Declining scores on college entrance examinations, discipline problems, and financial pressures have all led to strong criticism of education.

Looking back over 20th Century English curricula, we see an emphasis on rhetoric and traditional grammatical skills followed by a shift to transformational grammar. The classics of literature taught from an anthology were followed by shorter units called minicourses, based on modern works. In 1940 when the National Council of Teachers of English published A Correlated Curriculum, a few changes occurred in the traditional approach, but not many. By 1956, when N.C.T.E. published The English Language Arts in the Secondary Schools advocating the teaching unit "developed around a central theme or purpose," then English curricula slowly followed the thematic approach, which gained in popularity during the '70's.

Teaching values also became a major concern. Many teachers read Sidney Simon's Values in Education and began to use values clarification materials in the classroom. We discovered that we had already been teaching values, but we had not set any goals. By the choice of our subject matter, by the amount of time we spent on a topic, by the tone of our voice, we were implying certain attitudes and values. Then we began to set goals in terms of what values we wanted to teach.

But recently the declining ACT and SAT scores have frightened parents into calling for a movement "Back to the Basics." School administrators and teachers are feeling pressured to emphasize basic skills of grammar, spelling, and punctuation -- all in isolation from ideas or literature.

We, as English teachers, should remind taxpayers that we need not neglect our literary heritage in order to provide basic instruction. Certainly a quotation from essayist Francis Bacon, such as "Studies serve for delight, for ornament,

and for ability," can entertain, enlighten, and facilitate better than a boring line such as "He expects to come south for the winter and will arrive next week." By choosing Bacon's quotation, we may also teach young people to value their studies.

It is time for English teachers -- as leaders in our profession -- to set goals for the English curricula. We should remind taxpayers that subject matter, basic skills and values are three separate areas, but they can be taught simultaneously, not in fragmentation, to prepare young people for the challenges of the 21st Century. Our presentation today demonstrates how these three elements may be combined: Judy Odom -- Women and Literature, Doris Wyatt -- Oral Communication, and Myma Slawson -- Tomorrow and Tomorrow: Future Studies.

Women and Literature

All of us now teaching English in the public schools are among the people who will decide the direction language arts instruction will take as we move toward a new century. We are the ones who know -- in a way the politicians and administrators never can -- what skills our students need to build successful lives.

I believe with Eliot Wigginton -- editor and originator of the Foxfire books -- that "You don't teach the basics just by teaching the basics. You do it by carrying out interesting worthwhile projects in which the basics are involved." An elective program which allows students to choose courses that reflect their particular interests can also be a program which insists on quality in writing and thinking. It can be a program which sets high standards and challenges both our students and ourselves.

In the 60's stampede to join the new revolution of relevance, many educators trampled underfoot the simple truth that to be good, a piece of writing must do more than feel good to its author. The intellectual orgasm of authorship becomes nothing more than mental masturbation unless it can stimulate a

response in someone else. While we encouraged our students to glory in the solitary pleasure of the creative process, we glossed over the unappealing truth that to write well requires committment and self-discipline and sweat. We forgot that good writing is -- or should be -- more than a satisfying emotional release. Students do not become effective, creative communicators just because they have learned to let their thoughts and feelings rush freely from the point of a felt tip pen.

Reading good literature and writing about it can lead students to important insights about their values and their lives. Making those insights possible should be a primary teaching goal. But we become little more than amateur therapists if we do not demand that our students express the new ideas they explore in well phrased, carefully structured, correctly spelled sentences and paragraphs.

I teach a one-semester class called Women and Literature in which I try to combine interesting thematic material with practice in traditional composition techniques. Whether the student is writing an essay or taking a short answer test, he or she knows that grammar, spelling and sentence structure will always count. I give 2 grades on every composition -- 1 for content and 1 for mechanics. When a specific problem -- such as awkward or unnecessary sentence fragments -- appears, I take time out to work with the students on correcting that problem.

Women and Literature is usually about 2/3 female and 1/3 male. Although I consider myself a feminist -- and say as much to the kids the first day -- I'm not attempting to teach a class in the literature of feminism. I want to enlarge my students' awareness of the contributions women have made to our society in many fields -- so we read the works of Emily Dickinson and Nikki

Giovanni, Lorraine Hansbury and Sylvia Plath. We study the courageous lives of Eleanor Roosevelt and Elizabeth Blackwell and Marian Anderson. We look at the paintings of Mary Cassatt and Georgia O'Keeffe. And we listen to the music of Carly Simon and Linda Ronstadt and Karla Bonoff and Joan Baez.

I want the young women and the young men in my class to think about how sex roles are changing in our complex society and to explore solutions to the problems and perplexities these changing roles can create in their own lives. So we use film, videotapes, filmstrips, poetry, novels, recordings of plays and popular songs -- to stimulate discussion of marriage, divorce, parenting, the double standard, and the often conflicting claims of family and career.

A variety of writing assignments helps keep interest high while reinforcing composition skills. When we read sections of The Feminine Mystique along with a booklet on stereotypes, my closing assignment after a couple of days of discussion is a one-page minimum, in-class paper entitled "Who Am I?" I'd like to read some excerpts from a few of the responses.

(1) FEMALE

I'm my own individual. I try not to be like other people -- clones! -- and to be my own self. I try to use my thoughts, my imagination, my feelings, and not care about what others think.

I'm out in this world alone, struggling to become what I want to become. To go to school and have a profession of my own....

I am part of this screwed-up world; I feel like part of the mountains, the oceans, the trees. I feel like part of everything in nature, everything striving to grow and grow and grow....

(2) FEMALE

...Sometimes I look in the mirror for a long time wondering if the reflection I see is me. If I had another face, or another color, or another name, or another sex, would I still be me?

I have defined "me" as what I feel and not my image or my label. If I were a black man, I think I would still be me....

I am scared of things, but I try to come off as a self-assured and slightly arrogant person. The things that scare me most are being alone and dying. I don't want to grow old. I wish I could stay the way I am now. Growing old symbolizes loneliness and death to me....

(3) MALE

I am a person who is unsure of my place in life... Things happen so fast and the future is so quick. I am almost lost in yesterday. I'm on a train going forward, but I am always looking back....

(4) FEMALE

I am a hot-tempered little time bomb who is sometimes afraid to explode. I'm picky and selfish on the one hand, and on the other hand, I'm shy and stupid. I am a typical teen-ager, I guess -- confused with future decisions, hating my parents and wanting a car. I feel like two different people because I am a vicious little brat at home, and away I feel easy and act crazy and sometimes frantic because I let things slip by... I also write like my life is -- in bits and pieces, all mixed up, in no certain order....

My students always seem to enjoy the poems of Nikki Giovanni. One of the activities I like for them to try is writing some free verse poetry of their own in Nikki Giovanni's style. The poems they create -- usually after considerable grumbling and complaint -- are invariably interesting, sometimes witty, occasionally poignant.

This one -- one of my favorites -- was done by a boy who had also been in my American literature class the year before:

Never more.
Poe had trouble with
a raven one time
But I wouldn't have
had that trouble.
If that raven
had said one word
to me,
By God, I woulda
shot him.

This one is also by a male student:

As I rode in space in my
own little world, I noticed
a star as I went by.
The star looked lonely
As most stars do, so
I stopped to give it
Some company, for it

was a big place and
I had a lot of time.
As I sat on the star
looking at the universe
I noticed something.
Being alone is so much fun.

This last poem was written by a 17-year-old female student who had transferred to Science Hill from a high school in another state. She was married, and the mother of 6-month-old twin boys.

You hear how life is at 17
Well it just isn't, it just
ain't for me.
I'm already faced with
so much responsibility it's hard
But I don't mind
most of the time.
Most of the time, I say,
'cause sometimes I just
want to go home and forget
it all, be that irresponsible
young girl that Mommy cares for.
I love him. I laugh
'cause we're still 2 dumb
kids in love, tryin' to act
all grown up.
Inside I wanna
go to the school dance, be
the school president I was.
But I know now I can't
So I'll just act like
I'm older
and nobody will
know.

Among the short stories we study is F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Bernice Bobs Her Hair." After reading the story and seeing a film of it, we talk about 1920's ideas of a woman's place, and about the reasons for the deterioration of the relationship between Marjorie and her visiting cousin Bernice. Then I ask the students to take the basic plot -- a visiting relative who must be initiated into local customs, who succeeds too well, and who leaves under less-than-cordial circumstances -- and create a modern, 1980's story of their own.

I'd like to read you an excerpt or two from one of these "NEW WAVE" stories. This one is by a girl, written in diary form.

July 11, 1979

Dear Diary,

Today I've really been excited...my cousin from Utah is coming down for a visit. I don't know very much about her now, since the last time we've seen each other was when we were kids. She gets in tomorrow after noon. I'm trying to get Mike to "be with" her this week (I think he is going to do it!). I've blown my savings on this... I got us an "ounce" and 2 grams of "Coke" to enjoy while she's here. (I don't even know if she parties, but what we don't use I can <u>always</u> sell.) I'm going on to crash now...

Sweet Dreams,
Cory

July 12, 1979

Dear Diary,

I feel like such an ass... I had forgotten Rachel is a full fledged Morman. I just about died when we met, here she was Miss Straight Lace with ME!?? How am I going to manage? When she got off of the plane she wouldn't even go in the Pop Shop for a soda ("It's against my religion" -- so is coffee, tea, alcohol, drugs and of course pre-marital sex...how awful!) I think I have my work cut out for me if Rachel is going to be a success here.

Sweet Dreams,
Cory

July 13, 1979

Dear Diary,

Well Rachel really gave me a rush this morning. I was cutting myself 2 big nice lines of "Coke" on my hand mirror, and in she walks asking to borrow my mirror. Before I could answer she walks over, picks up my mirror and blows the "dust off". I could have cried, there was at least a dime of Coke. I have to have some way to smarten this girl up.

Happy Flight and Sweet Dreams,
Cory

July 14, 1979

Dear Diary,

Everything went well as planned. She took the lude, drank and I think she even pleased Mike. Now maybe she will realize what she is missing. God, please don't let her be p.o.'ed when she comes down. She's really great fun. She was the life of the beach party, even Nick couldn't keep his eyes off of her, but I set that straight. I can't believe the change.

Sweet Dreams,
Cory

July 15, 1979

Dear Diary,

My God, I don't believe this day; it's all my fault. I never should have turned her on without her knowing. When she got up this morning she acted kind of spacey but I thought it was just a hangover. I left to pick up some food for breakfast (I asked her if she wanted to come, but she said she didn't want to go out -- I didn't think anything was unusual, so I left her alone). When I left she found you and read you, diary. I suppose what I had written upset her. She found every bit of my drugs. All that is left is foil, cellophane wrap and empty stash boxes. The flushed them all down the toilet (God I'm straight now and today...facing it hurts so bad). She left a note saying she had disgraced herself, her family, her church, and God. She said she wasn't fit to live anymore....

The story ends with Rachel/Bernice a suicide and Cory/Marjorie trying to cope with her guilt.

Teaching this Women and Literature class has convinced me that it is possible to combine classic literature, values clarification and composition practice to strengthen basic writing techniques. As our students walk the tight wire into the 21st Century, it's our obligation to provide them with sound, relevant course content and solid technical skills if we expect their English education to serve them as the balance pole they need.

Oral Communication

Years ago schools taught many courses by oral recitation; rhetoric or public speaking was considered an important part of training for the professions. But largely due to the population growth and to overcrowded classrooms, speaking and listening have faded from the English agenda. In our daily lives, approximately 80-85% of our language usage is oral; therefore, we need to teach oral communication skills.

In my course Oral Communication, I teach all basic language skills; but I emphasize speaking and listening skills that we use daily. Person-to-Person, by Kathleen Galvin and Cassandra Book, is our textbook. It begins with

information on the communication process; then we study the self as communicator, one-to-one communication, group communication, and one-to-group communication. As we study each type of communication, we play games or do exercises for practice.

Although the basic language skills of speaking and listening are the focus of this study, the students also have specific objectives for learning subject matter. Topics are usually chosen by the students. For example, when we present a panel discussion, the students choose a topic which plays a significant role in their own lives, such as "Should the Reagan administration enact a regulation that would require federally funded agencies to notify parents within 10 days after an adolescent is given a prescription for birth control?" Or when students plan informative speeches -- a girl who diets often studies the causes and symptoms of anorexia nervosa, or a young body builder discusses the effects of nutrition, vitamins, and steroids on the human body. Drugs, child abuse, rape, sports, and career choices are favorites. Because these topics have strong appeal for the young adults, they will eagerly pursue research and spend time interviewing authorities for information.

Along with the study of basic grammatical skills and relevant subject matter, students examine their own values. At the beginning of the course when they study the self as communicator, they ask questions about their own perceptions:

> How do you see yourself?
> How do others see you?
> How does this affect your communication?

They answer questions on their feelings, their interests, and their needs. Since students choose their own topics, the ability to think and to make decisions is enhanced. They learn to evaluate these values -- discarding some and keeping some.

Today for demonstration purposes Myma and Judy will play a game using symbols.

It is typical of the games that I have made to go along with whatever we are practicing. This one shows the value of our language. All of us are familiar with the 26 letters of our English alphabet and arrangements of these symbols to form words, which stand for certain things -- for example, D E S K stands for a piece of furniture so when a person says "desk," it is easy to mentally imagine what he is talking about.

Instead of alphabetical symbols, this game employs six new symbols which do not have names that we have agreed to call them, as our alphabet does; therefore, we must describe each symbol. Of course, this descriptive process is ambiguous and slow compared to using a standardized alphabet and universal definitions. Students who play this game can see the value of a standardized language.

Two flannel boards will be placed so that the 2 players cannot see each other; however, they may exchange questions and answers. Each of the two players has an identical set of six symbols. Judy will place her 6 symbols on her flannel board in whatever fashion she wishes. Myma will try to duplicate with her symbols the arrangement that Judy has made. (Judy now arranges her symbols.)

I've had some interesting experiences. Sometimes people call the same pieces different colors. Of course, it is easier if we use a variety of colors as we have here today. If we have only one or two colors, then we must depend more on the description of the shapes. The linguistic background of participants influences their word choice. I had one engineer use rather technical terms; artists tend to use specific color descriptions. Judy describes as Myma follows her directions: "Okay. In the top left hand corner of the board, I have the black symbol that looks like a moon with a bite out of it, and the bite -- the small curve -- is facing the lower left hand corner, and the longer, sort of narrow

part of the moon -- crescent, is at the top.

"Okay, the red symbol is next to it, and the curved part of the red symbol is facing left. The long leg of the right angle is facing right and the short leg is at the bottom. The bottom part of the moon is about the midpoint of the curve of the red thing.

"The dark green symbol that looks like a K is to the right of the red symbol. The right angle of what would be a K is closest to the red, and the two other legs of the K are facing right."

Myma: "Is the shorter or longer point to the lower right?"

Judy: "The shortest part of two legs of the K is at the lower right.

"Begin a new row. The light purple -- the lavender piece -- is arranged so that it looks like part of a rough cross, and the one arm of the cross-- the short arm -- is pointing left. The other completed arm of the cross is straight up. And the part that could be an arm of the cross, but that comes down into something that looks like the slant of a roof of a house -- that part is facing down.

"Then in the middle, I have the pink symbol fixed to look like an umbrella with the jagged edges down.

"And the last one I have -- the aqua symbol. The smaller part of it is pointing upward. At the top -- the shortest arm of the top -- is to the left and the longest arm is to the right. And it's the opposite at the bottom."

Doris: "Judy has now given directions for placing the symbols on the board. Now you, Myma, may ask questions; Judy, you may answer or ask Myma questions. See if you have your symbols as you would like them to be before we make a judgement.

Myma: "The purple piece next to the umbrella -- How is it positioned in

regard to the umbrella -- in a straight row or -- the top of the cross?"

Judy: "More or less -- a straight row -- but the part that slants down like the roof of the house -- the lowest part of that comes down maybe -- two inches lower than the lowest part of the umbrella."

Myma: "So the top of the cross is higher than the top of the umbrella?"

Judy: "Higher than the top of the umbrella."

Myma: "Okay, and what about -- is the green -- the bottom line -- the horizontal line of the green K, is it on the same line with the bottom line...?"

Judy: "Approximately. And it comes out maybe half an inch above the top of the red one."

Myma: "The aqua 'I' or whatever it is -- the lower left point of that -- where is it in relation to the right point of the pink umbrella?"

Judy: "Okay, it comes down -- about a half inch of space that separates the two. And the longest point comes down below and extends to the left of the jagged edge of the umbrella."

Myma: "Okay, I think that's got it."

Doris: "Audience, let's take a look. How close are they?"

Audience: "Terrific. They're very close."

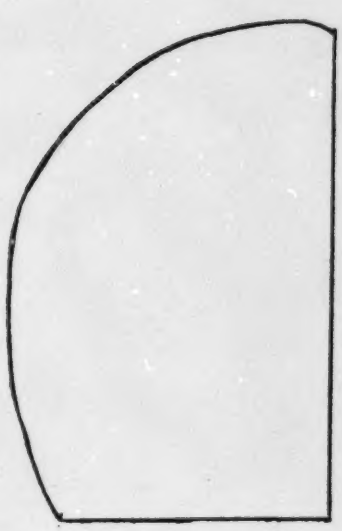
Doris: "As you can see, it is very, very accurate."

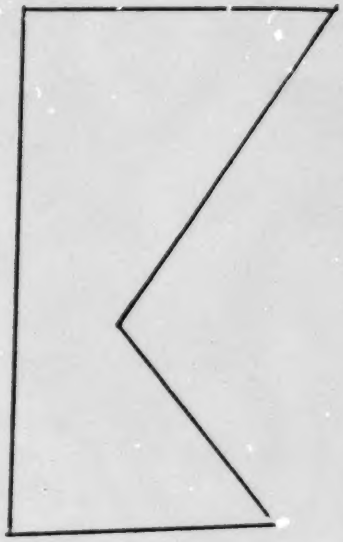
Judy: "I see one thing. I've got the fat side of my umbrella on the left and she's got it on the right."

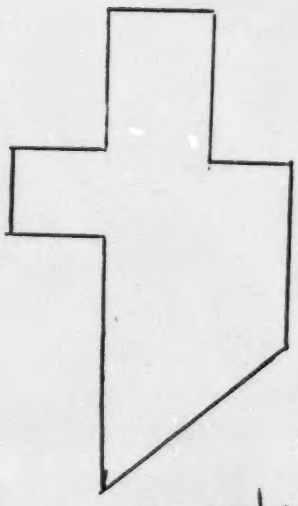
Doris: "One small difference."

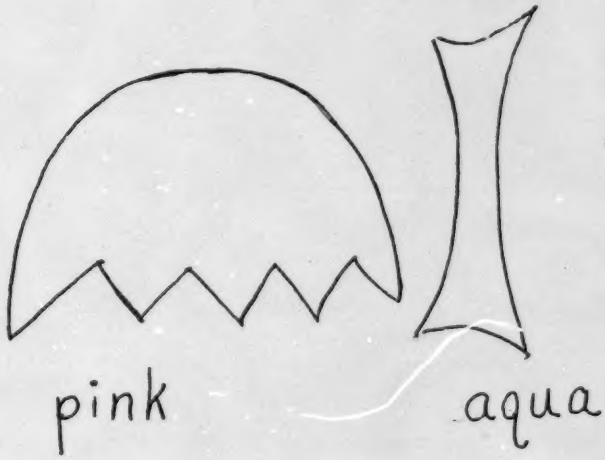
As you can see, putting these on the board requires considerably more time describing these symbols than it would take if we simply had A,B,C,D -- the usual symbols, and of course, if we had it marked off in squares like inches,

it would be easier than this board without markings. When I do this with my students, they can get fairly close.









Since we are using only 6 symbols, you can see that the communication process is difficult -- especially if people have a variety of experiences, when they have a large number of symbols, and when they have very complex problems to discuss. In class we have fun with this game, and we learn some things that we can't learn from reading. Our objectives in playing this game are on three levels:

(1) For subject matter, we study symbols of the English language,

(2) For basic grammatical skills, the emphasis is on speaking, listening, and thinking,

(3) For values, we learn the value of symbols in the communication process.

I hope this gives you some idea how to teach all 3 of the elements simultaneously. Just learning "basic skills" will not be enough to survive the 21st Century.

Tomorrow and Tomorrow : Future Studies

Several years ago when I first mentioned the possibility of test-tube babies to my students, they were horrified. "Yuk! That's gross!" , they said. "That will never happen. That's against God's will! He won't <u>let</u> it happen!" One person looked at his schedule card and muttered, "I thought this was an English class. Am I in the wrong room?" But later that year, Louise Brown, the first test-tube baby was born. Two years ago, I mentioned sperm banks and surrogate mothers and got the same response, yet within the same year both had become a reality.

The answers I receive to a pretest lay to rest any questions I had about the necessity of my course. In some cases, the answers reflected a need for

training in the basics of grammar, spelling, and writing in complete sentences. More revealing, however, was their need for training in developing values appropriate to the decisions they will have to make in the modern world. They are ignorant of the actual changes going on in their world, and even more ignorant of the bioethical implications of these changes.

A sperm bank, they tell me, is "where a man who don't have none can go to get some." A test-tube baby is "a baby born in a tube instead of their mother's wound," or "a baby that don't have any real parents." A surrogate mother is "one who abuses her children," and a genetic engineer "builds stuff." No one would even hazzard a guess at a definition of "bioethics." Indeed, not even one could define the word "ethics." They lack the basic skills needed for survival in tomorrow's world -- skills more involved than the Three R's.

I also ask my students to place themselves in one of seven categories as they view the future -- from deniers of change and passive acceptors to welcomers and shapers of the future. Most of them place themselves in one of the first categories. They tend to feel that the world is going to be a big mess, and they feel powerless to do anything about it. My goal is to move as many students as I can from their positions as passive acceptors to positions as welcomers and shapers. I hope to instill within them the feeling that the individual <u>is</u> still important; that he <u>can</u> shape his own personal future as well as influence what kind of world we will have in the 21st Century; and that the responsibility for the joys and griefs of his own life rests with him.

According to Bob Conklin, co-founder of Personal Dynamics Institute and author of <u>Reach for the Sun</u> and <u>How To Get People To Do Things</u>, "Studies by the Institute of Life Insurance indicate that every year people feel they are losing control over their lives. That's a tragedy... In an age when personal freedom

should be so highly prized, it is fading from people's minds. Such attitudes not only suck the hope and enthusiasm from individual lives but also jeopardize a free nation's existence. The greatest threat to freedom need not be guided missiles but a mass belief that liberty no longer exists. Personal freedom is gradually surrendered by not growing, not learning... Greater faith is placed in things rather than in thoughts -- in a 'standard of living' rather than a 'standard of thinking.' The educational processes do not teach the strategies, techniques, skills, and attitudes necessary to gain control of one's existence. So the individual feels lost, confused, and isolated from the miracles, magnificence, and positive nature of life."

We have been concerned from the beginning of our elective program with who Johnny and Susie will be in the future -- as individuals, as social beings, and as world citizens. In my classes, I do use science fiction, but only as a vehicle for catapulting students into situations which will call for them to have answers to those basic questions -- who am I, or am I anybody at all? What do I believe in? And what is my place in the world?

None of us would question the fact that our students need continuous training in the traditional basic skills. But we sometimes forget that it is the very technology we have praised so much for leading us to progress that has caused so many of our problems. Who reads anymore? Who writes? Who thinks? How can Johnny and Susie listen when there is a constant barrage of noise bombarding them every waking moment? How can they listen to us when they are plugged up to Sony Walkmans half the time? How are they to learn to think when the media encourages them to do everything but think, and when schools all too frequently reward conformity and routine rather than creative thinking and self-esteem, when Johnny is given only external rewards and Susie is never helped to discover internal

motivation? In the midst of the chaos of the 20th Century, Johnny and Susie do stand confused, helpless, and alone -- waiting for someone else to do their thinking for them. The potential danger of a generation of kids so ill-prepared to walk into the 21st Century is frightening indeed.

During a unit we did on "Status, Happiness, and The Good Life," I asked my students to write essays on their ideas of happiness and on what they had to contribute to the world. Tammy wrote, "It would take five million dollars, a pound of marijuana, a case of liquor, and a Corvette. If I was eighteen and married to Harvey, I'd be happy. There's nothing for me to contribute." We couldn't seem to keep Tammy in school, so I never found out if she felt she didn't have anything to contribute, or if she felt she had no obligation to contribute to the world. If you think her answer was pitiful, you should have seen Harvey! I saw them on the street not long ago -- Tammy, still not eighteen but obviously pregnant, clutching to a reluctant Harvey. I suppose she's found her contribution to the world, but it is not a prospect that encourages me.

What I try to do in my classes is use a subject students are interested in -- science fiction -- combined with the basic skills -- centered around the theme, "Becoming Responsible for Myself and My World." We try to point out the necessity of using rather than abusing technology. We use five main resources: the textbook You and Science Fiction: A Humanistic Approach to Tomorrow; the Center for the Humanities slide/sound series, Human Values in an Age of Technology; the book Fahrenheit 451; a video-tape of Brave New World; and a filmstrip series called Life Passages: Personal Growth from Adolescence to Adulthood.

I know you could all figure out your own courses of study for works such as Fahrenheit 451 and Brave New World. I want to tell you instead of one of the activities we have found helpful. In evaluating any course, the bottom line is: what

are the results? In the business world today, it's called results orientation. Perhaps as educators we recognize it as accountability. After the course, have Johnny and Susie improved in the basic skills? Can they demonstrate an increased ability to think? I ask two additional questions: (1) Can they relate what they have learned to their own future lives in a positive way? and (2) Has their self-esteem been raised enough for them to feel personally in control of their lives and thus responsible for the future?

The activity that seems to bring the best results is our class reunion based on the Life Passages unit. It is the only assignment I have ever been thanked for giving! I believe, with Bob Conklin, that "what you hold in your mind today will shape your experiences of tomorrow." This is one way I get my students to think -- about themselves today and in the future.

First, we write a "future biography" for a mock reunion to be held in twenty years. Needless to say, this first round turns up a great deal of fantasy. They are all going to have $100,000 a year jobs, marry the person of their dreams, and be famous. Then I step in with my "reality therapy." I have two decks of cards. The first is called "Marker Events." Each student draws two cards. These are meant to represent "life's little surprises," such as: "You have two college degrees, but there are no jobs in your field," "You have just married for the second time and feel it was a mistake," or "You've inherited $750,000." The second deck, called "Statistics," is made up of heart attacks, cancer, and automobile accidents based on the number of students in class. Obviously, some of the cards in this deck are blank. In addition, we vote as a class to add one likely event, such as "on the verge of nuclear war," "inflation at 25%", or "world peace has been established." Now each student must rewrite his paper, using these elements plus a Reunion Questionnaire. The next few days are spent in a flurry

of activity. Some students are furious, some depressed, some gleeful, if they have drawn "lucky cards". One 17 year old drew a card that her marriage was a mistake. She held out her left hand with a tiny diamond. "I'm not going to make any mistake. I love Bobby, and he loves me. We're going to get married as soon as I graduate next year. I don't want to write my paper according to this dumb old card." "Well, sweetie," I said, "I thought I wasn't going to make that mistake, either, but I did -- twice, in fact. Now you write!"

I felt sorry for Tim, a very limited boy. All the family he had was his mother -- and he drew the card that said, "Your mother just died." But he took it in stride. He wrote that he became a welder, had a nice wife and two kids, and when his mother died he had her frozen so that someday when her disease could be cured he could thaw her out to be with her grandchildren because, as he said, "people need all the family they can get."

On the day of the mock reunion, after we have shared our stories, we vote for the saddest, the happiest, the most realistic, and the best written stories. Before the papers are turned in, each student has a chance to add a reaction -- how did it feel to imagine yourself 20 years older? what is the greatest hope you have for the future? the greatest fear? what is your greatest strength? what is your responsibility?

The variety of responses never ceases to amaze me. Natalie wrote, "About a year ago I had a fatal car accident, but thanks to laser surgery I'm much better now." Responses include all sorts of scientific advances. Children run away from home when refused access to the family rocket-copter. There are shots to cure cancer, and a shot called "neucleosis" which makes one immune to radio-active fallout. Education is accomplished at home by "computer tutors." Families

live in bubble mansions. Jerry turned his paper in late. He said he had difficulty finding paper because in 2002 all communication was on audio and video tape. Julie married a brain surgeon who programmed children's brains for jobs they were assigned to at birth. Although one boy solved the overpopulation problem by having everyone over 60 put to sleep, almost all the kids planned to take care of aging parents in their own homes. Doug, who said his wife had divorced him and moved the kids to Vega Base on the dark side of the moon, said his parents lived in an "elders duplex," but he hoped to raise enough money to save them from being sent to a "senile center." Kitty wrote, "I thought my marriage would last forever until my husband asked me for a divorce. He said he was not happy anymore and he was tired of marriage and of our retarded daughter. The advice I'd give my children is : live your life to the fullest, work hard at your job -- and be very, very careful in choosing your husband or wife!"

As the students were forced to face unexpected problems, they began to take an inventory of their strengths. A close and supportive family was the number one factor in being able to face hardships. Faith in God was a strong factor, also. Then came the personal statements of strength: "I think before I make decisions," "I am adaptable," "I can keep my head in a crisis," "I have the capacity to love." The fears they expressed were, number one, nuclear war; then the fear "that I won't be something in this world," and the fear of being alone. Their hopes -- for children without deformities, cures for fatal diseases, and world peace.

All of them said it was difficult to imagine themselves as being 20 years older. As Sam said, "There's a lot of decisions and a lot of work between 18 and 38." Mac wrote, "When I think of myself 20 years from now, I freeze and go blank. I see that I must start building my self-confidence right now." Melanie

said, "I realized that I have always depended on my parents for everything, but soon I will have to live my own life. It's time to start setting goals if I want my life to be successful. When I drew the cards, I felt cheated. But then I realized that these things could happen to me."

Drawing the cards was a shock. As Robin wrote, "No matter how meticulous our plans, they can easily be shattered. There will always be disappointments and things we can't change. The important thing is to feel good about ourselves, have the strength to face our problems, and develop the ability to adapt when changes are necessary." Jack wrote, "It brought up a lot of what ifs, and all these what ifs trace back to now. The future is now."

Eighteen weeks after we had begun, we came to the end. Over 90% now saw themselves as welcomers and shapers rather than passive acceptors. 97% saw themselves as responsible. Larry wrote, "This assignment made me think -- about what I want my life to be like, and what my responsibility for my own future is. I feel that we must all take an active part in trying to improve our world, not only for ourselves, but for all mankind."

Beyond the glamor of travel into new galaxies, beyond the excitement of exotic careers, beyond the pain and struggle and glory that touches every human life along its passage, my students reached out for the future with hopeful, eager hands -- willing to work, willing to face adversity, willing to care. "I hope to keep an honest heart," wrote Fred. "I just hope we learn to trust and appreciate our fellow humans -- all we really have that matters is each other."

I think Fred expressed my philosophy. As an English teacher, yes, I must be concerned with dangling participles; but as a human being, I must also be concerned with dangling lives. Whether we live to see the dawn of the 21st Century is one of the enshrouded mysteries of our personal futures. But we feel that one of the

responsibilities we have as teachers is to help our students answer a basic need -- a sense of self, and a sense that we do belong to each other.

We are all riders on the spaceship Earth -- together. When we truly understand that we need each other, we shall survive; we shall transcend; we shall realize our infinite capacities as members of the human race.

Yes, Fred -- all we really have is each other; and knowing that, together we can help each other reach for the stars. We dare not do less for the children of tomorrow.